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SUBJECT: Ambassador's October 13 Dinner with Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh

11. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador hosted a dinner October 13 for Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh, who, in his capacity as head of the MFA's Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, will soon travel to the United States to discuss Viet Kieu issues. Binh said Vietnam desired improved relations with Vietnamese-Americans and sought to welcome ethnic Vietnamese back to the "homeland." He stressed that he is willing meet with any person or group who had a "different viewpoint," but their attitude had to be "constructive;" he would not engage with "extremists." On China, Binh said that Beijing needed to discuss territorial issues (the Spratlys) with all interested parties and not try to deal with invidual claimants; the same applied to the Paracels. Vietnam looked to other countries in the region for good development examples, but the most obvious model was China. Vietnam also wanted to play a more prominent role in the region, and WTO accession would help to speed this along; however, the support and "sympathy" of the United States are key. The USG sent the wrong message to Vietnam by failing to deal with "negative anti-Vietnam elements" in the United States, and attempting to pressure Vietnam through the Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation, for example, would be counter-productive. Although Vietnam sees human rights as a collective issue, it is ready to deal with "individual cases" raised by the United States. End Summary.

OVERSEAS VIETNAMESE

12. (U) The Ambassador, accompanied by PAO and Pol/C, hosted a dinner October 13 for Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh. Binh, who is also head of the MFA's Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, will depart October 15 for a six-day visit to Canada and a ten-day visit to the United States, including stops in Washington, D.C., New Orleans and Northern California. VFM Binh's purpose is to discuss Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) issues with central and local government authorities, community groups and individuals of Vietnamese descent. Binh's delegation will include Tran Van Thinh, Director of the Committee's Department for General Community Research, and Dang Tran Phong, Editor-in-chief of the Committee's Que Huong (Homeland) Journal. Both Thinh and Phong joined VFM Binh and the Ambassador for dinner.

13. (U) Binh opened by explaining that the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, which became part of the MFA in 1996 and has a permanent staff of 70, was primarily responsible for outreach to communities of ethnic Vietnamese living overseas through the MFA's missions and official media, including the Committee's "Homeland" journal and website. Binh agreed with the Ambassador that the 1.4 million Vietnamese-Americans represented a potential bridge between the United States and Vietnam. Although dealing with the thorny issue of Vietnam's relations with Vietnamese-Americans was sometimes "difficult," after many years, "things are getting better." For its part, Vietnam considered all overseas Vietnamese to be "Vietnamese," regardless of their current citizenship. "Although the war divided us, after 30 years, there is no reason to remain divided," the Vice Foreign Minister said. "Asians attach great importance to their homeland and where their ancestors' graves are located, and Vietnam's primary objective is to have overseas Vietnamese return home and visit these graves and see for themselves the changes in Vietnam," he continued. Returning to Vietnam to "make economic or other contributions" was of secondary importance, Binh asserted.

14. (U) The Ambassador noted that improved relations between Viet Kieu and Vietnam would have a positive impact on the overall bilateral relationship. Conversely, voices in the Vietnamese-American community speaking out against building up the bilateral relationship could be harmful. We needed to have positive voices to counterbalance the harmful ones and to help the leaders in both countries to move the bilateral relationship in a positive direction. Outreach, both by the Committee and by Vietnam's Ambassador and other

diplomats in the United States, was important to bridge the information gap, the Ambassador said.

15. (U) VFM Binh explained that, while in the United States, he would meet with anyone who is willing to discuss issues in a constructive manner. He would not meet with "extremists," however, or anyone else who does not wish to have a "constructive dialogue." Binh noted that he had met twice with former Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and agreed that, while the latter's high profile visit was positive, what was more important was to develop a "fundamental, broad-based way" to improve Vietnam's relationship with Vietnamese-Americans.

16. (U) Binh explained that ethnic Vietnamese who had assumed different nationalities, although treated as foreigners in Vietnam, nonetheless had "special privileges," such as being able to purchase land and other real estate. He agreed that it is important to ensure that, as the number of Vietnamese-Americans returning to Vietnam to visit or live continued to rise, they are aware of the sometimes special rules that govern their activities here. The Ambassador stressed that one of the U.S. Mission's primary responsibilities is to provide assistance to Americans in trouble. If a Vietnamese-American ran afoul of the law -- particularly outside of urban areas -- local police and other officials often are not aware of the need for notification, for example, and this sometimes gives the GVN a black eye. Good coordination between the Mission and the GVN is the way to avoid this, the Ambassador said.

17. (U) Binh listened with interest to the Ambassador's listing of a number of prominent Vietnamese-Americans -- including a professional football player -- and agreed that they could play a useful role in advancing Vietnam's relations with the Viet Kieu community in the United States. That said, Vietnam is always ready to welcome any ethnic Vietnamese back to the "homeland;" even if they could not make a "direct contribution," they could still help to build a bridge. Binh reiterated that Vietnam would not hesitate to talk with people of different viewpoints, particularly if these viewpoints are different because of a lack of understanding about the "real situation" in Vietnam. However, there would be no discussions with extremists, Binh repeated. Vietnam needs to be persistent, and it might take a long time to win over some members of the Vietnamese-American community. But Vietnam has time. Some 20 years ago, only 8,000 Vietnamese-Americans returned to Vietnam in one year. Now the number was 360,000 per year and rising. All of these individuals might not agree with what they see and hear in Vietnam, but they are welcome nonetheless, Binh said.

CHINA

18. (SBU) VFM Binh's brief also includes Asia and Africa issues and, changing gears, Binh discussed briefly PRC Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's recent visit to Hanoi and his bilateral discussions with Vietnam's leaders (septel). On the subject of the Spratlys, Binh opined that China's aim was to "put aside" the current territorial disputes and focus on oil and natural gas exploration, but, because this is a sensitive maritime area, all the parties involved should discuss the issue only within the context of the Declaration of Conduct, he stressed. Separate discussions or deals only added to mutual suspicion and mistrust. For that reason, Vietnam would not join China and others in a deal to explore jointly the disputed area because this would send a signal that Vietnam sought only to take care of itself. The key to resolve this is a discussion among all the parties, Binh emphasized.

19. (SBU) Turning to tourism in the Spratlys, Binh said that, although several Vietnamese tourism companies had "noisily" advertised trips to the islands, in reality this is possible only during April and May and there just are not the facilities to handle tourists. The GVN does not want to increase tension with China over this issue and, although it did not actively discourage the companies from advertising travel to the Spratlys, it did not encourage them, either. For now, the issue appeared to have faded away, Binh said. China had itself indicated its desire to develop tourism in the Paracels, he added. For historic reasons, Vietnam had a claim to two of the islands and had told the Chinese that, for the same reason that China opposes Vietnam's development of tourism in the Spratlys, Vietnam opposes Paracels tourism. If China wants to move forward with this tourism plan, it has to discuss it with the other concerned parties, Binh said.

VIETNAM IN ASIA AND THE WORLD

10. (SBU) Fundamentally, Vietnam shares with every other country in Asia the desire for peace and stability, Binh

noted. In this sense, Vietnam is no different from China. As for an economic role model, Vietnam has endeavored to select the "good experiences" of its neighbors, such as China, Thailand and Malaysia. Of course, China's experiences are a good fit for Vietnam because of the similarities of both countries' political and economic systems. In terms of the development of Vietnam's trade relations, the United States is its number one market, but Vietnam should not rely solely on this market. Because of trade disputes -- such as those involving shrimp and catfish -- it is wise for Vietnam to diversify its trading partners to lower the risks to itself. The EU, Japan and China -- the latter in particular because of its proximity to Vietnam -- are among Vietnam's more attractive trading partners. Politically, Vietnam hopes that ASEAN could be a solid political bloc, but some members -- such as Indonesia -- are focusing on internal political matters; "the sooner stabilized, the better," Binh continued. Vietnam is concerned about ASEAN stability, particularly as some members sometimes seem to be more concerned about their own national interests rather than those of the group as a whole.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND TRADE

11. (SBU) Vietnam's relationship with Japan is positive, thanks in large measure to Japan's status as Vietnam's largest ODA provider. Binh agreed that U.S. assistance -- particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention -- is significant, and Vietnam hopes for continued U.S. economic and other support, such as in bilateral WTO negotiations. The EU had recently concluded its WTO talks with Vietnam, and Japan had "promised" to conclude its bilateral negotiations soon. The United States and China were the only two question marks, and Vietnam hopes to persuade China not to have "greater requirements" than the United States and the EU. WTO accession could help Vietnam to play an even more prominent role in preserving peace and stability in the region, Binh said.

12. (SBU) The year 2005 would be significant because of the removal of textile quotas for WTO members China and India, who stood to benefit greatly, Binh noted. As a result, Vietnam's textile industry could "collapse." This would put great pressure on Vietnam and would lead to increased unemployment. WTO accession, while generally positive, would also have negative aspects, and Vietnam hopes that the United States will help to mitigate these downsides. Vietnam's economy could not become strong overnight, and Vietnam thus needed the "sympathy" of big countries like the United States, Binh argued.

USG SHOULD PROMOTE POSITIVE ELEMENTS

13. (SBU) Returning to the subject of Vietnamese-Americans, Binh expressed his hope that the USG would play a role in improving the "atmosphere" and promoting "positive and favorable elements" while reducing "negative elements." For example, the Vietnam Caucus on the Hill is a positive element and is playing a constructive role in building the bilateral relationship. However, the USG, by failing to take action against individuals and groups that sought to harm Vietnam, only created an unfavorable image of the United States in the eyes of many Vietnamese. Binh said that the GVN hoped that the USG would not hesitate in dealing with individuals such as Nguyen Huu Chanh and Vo Van Duc, whom many Vietnamese believe the United States supports by not bringing them to justice. (Note: Nguyen Huu Chanh is the president of the Government of Free Vietnam (GFVN), an exile group which calls for the overthrow of the GVN. The GFVN has previously operated camps of "freedom fighters" along the Thai border, and is accused by the GVN of involvement in attacks on GVN facilities in Vietnam and abroad. GFVN supporter Vo Van Duc was convicted in absentia by a Thai court of attempting to place a bomb in front of the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok. He is currently imprisoned in California while his extradition hearings continue. End Note.) The Ambassador stressed that the USG would take action if we had evidence of wrongdoing and urged the GVN to provide us with whatever information is available on the individuals and groups of concern.

HUMAN RIGHTS

14. (SBU) Binh agreed with the Ambassador that, in areas such as law enforcement cooperation and intelligence sharing, improving cooperation and diminishing the mistrust held by some can only come through a step-by-step process. Vietnam's leadership holds many different opinions, and some believe that the risks of closer relations with the United States outweigh the benefits. Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation did not help, Binh continued, and only served to convince some in Vietnam that the bilateral

relationship has more negative than positive aspects. In the area of human rights, Vietnam, like other Asian countries, believes that the group is more important than the individual, and that efforts to improve the lot of the greatest number of people outweigh those to help individuals or small groups. That said, Binh continued, Vietnam would pay attention to the individual cases the United States raised. While true that the United States and Vietnam have different systems, the Ambassador responded, human rights and religious freedom are issues of serious concern to the American people, and our two countries must work together to resolve our differences in these areas.

DIALOGUE WORKS BETTER THAN PRESSURE

15. (SBU) Over time, increased contacts between Vietnam and the United States will gradually decrease differences, but both sides need to make efforts, Binh continued. Vietnam is small, and pressure from a large country like the United States would be "counterproductive." However, if the United States sets out to resolve bilateral differences through dialogue, then Vietnam would be ready to work with the United States. Unfortunately, resolutions by certain American localities to "prevent" the visits of GVN officials have led some Vietnamese provincial officials to consider blocking the visits of USG officials. The Ambassador explained that these resolutions were a statement of local sentiment and had no force in law. Hopefully, the MFA would understand this and work with the Mission and Vietnamese local governments to ensure that USG travelers had safe and productive trips, the Ambassador urged. Binh concluded by underlining the importance of dealing with Vietnam with "peace and friendship." If the United States is able to do this, then there will be no "difficulties."

16. (SBU) Comment: Vice Foreign Minister Binh was an easy and knowledgeable interlocutor whose Asia experience -- he was Vietnam's first ambassador to South Korea in 1992 -- was reflected in his thoughtful discussion of regional issues. While he might be the first to admit that his brief -- promoting reconciliation between Vietnam and Vietnamese-Americans -- is not an easy one, his apparent open-mindedness in dealing with this issue will likely serve him well in the task ahead. End Comment.

MARINE